

Brian Berry

Rafael Otto: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Early Link Podcast. I'm your host, Rafael Otto. As usual, you can catch us on the air on 99.1 FM in Portland on Sundays at 4:30 PM or subscribe and listen wherever you find your podcasts. Today, I'm speaking with Brian Berry, the superintendent at the Yoncalla school district. Yoncalla is part of our Early Works Initiative, a partnership that includes Children's Institute and the Ford Family Foundation, and many other partners.

We'll hear some of the things that the district is doing to support local talent in Yoncalla and help community members teach in the district. A grow-your-own strategy that is getting results. Brian, welcome to the podcast.

Brian Berry: [00:00:40] Thank you very much!

Rafael Otto: [00:00:41] I know it's your spring break. I appreciate you taking some time when you're supposed to have a little bit of downtime.

Give us an overview of the Yoncalla school district, if you can. What does someone who's not familiar with Yoncalla need to know?

Brian Berry: [00:00:56] Well Yoncalla is a small rural community in Douglas County, actually Northern Douglas County. We have approximately 300 students and that's preschool through 12th grade. A farming community, a very conservative community. They have rural conservative values, and it's an absolutely awesome place to work.

Rafael Otto: [00:01:19] You've been in the district for quite a while, but you started as superintendent four years ago, yes?

Brian Berry: [00:01:25] Yes. I actually started teaching there in '96, then principal at the high school/middle schools since 2003. And then, yeah, this is my fourth year as superintendent.

Rafael Otto: [00:01:36] Tell me what that shift was like, moving from principal role over to the superintendent role?

Brian Berry: [00:01:43] Wow. That was quite the learning curve for me actually. At the time, I was in my own little building at the high school and my job was to make sure that kids graduated, really. So we would do anything legal to make sure kids got to graduation and really to set them up for any post-secondary opportunities that they were interested in.

I was in that position for a long time. Loved working with the kids at the high school and the middle school levels, and just really used to working with the parents and the community. And I believe I've earned their trust through all that hard work. You know, you're always part of football games, volleyball games, basketball games, so the parents get to know you really, really well. And then our superintendent decided to retire, Jan Zarate, and she had been there for a few years and she asked me if I wanted to step in because she thought I was the person to lead the work forward. I was very apprehensive because I was very comfortable at the high school.

But then I thought to myself, you know what? I think I can learn, and I think I can grow and become an even better person and teacher moving forward. So I took on the challenge and it has been an incredible ride learning about preschool, working with Children's Institute, Portland State University, Family Foundation, and just helping me move forward and growing as a person and moving the community forward.

Rafael Otto: [00:03:20] Talk about that shift. Because if you think about four years ago, there were a number of things happening... Preschool Promise was a new state preschool program at the time. There were different educational requirements for teachers that were going to be part of the Preschool Promise program. And then there was... there were things happening in Yoncalla in the preschool that you had to learn about when you started as superintendent. What'd you find out?

Brian Berry: [00:03:46] Wow. What did I find out? I found out a lot of things. I found out that I wasn't nearly as intelligent as I thought I was, is what happened. I went to a couple of Early Works meetings and really, I knew that we had a good foundational program down there. But once I started to sit in on the meetings and really hear the type of foundational work that they were doing for the community - trying to get parents involved - it was a game changer for me because what I saw were these incredible things happening at the preschool that were not happening in our elementary school and our middle school or in our high school. And really it was that communication piece that they were all about and getting parents involved.

I've been in education for 34 years now, from an education perspective, we have a certain way of doing things. And I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but we have a set way and it's a really fixed mindset. And I had to open up my mind and go, wow, these people have some incredible ideas and you know what, they're all legal. We could implement those, put those into play. It's a game changer for the Yoncalla community.

And again, what we were thinking was, you know what? We want to do a systems approach to everything. We want to take the incredible things that are working in our preschool, and we want to make them work in our elementary and our middle school and our high school. Things are going to look a little different because it's going to look different when you're working with preschool kids or you're working with high school kids, but the foundational concepts are the same.

Being able to work with parents, treat them with respect, and the respect that you want to be treated with. You know, let them take a look at our things like our handbooks and take a look at those things and go, "Wow, you know what, this is why we do things" and then have them question, well, "Why are we doing this" and then taking a look at it and going, "Oh, that's a great question. Why are we doing that?" There's no rhyme or reason for why we're doing that. The reason we're doing it is because it's been in there in that handbook for 30 years. So we're going to take that out. We're going to start listening to people and just treating them with the respect they deserve.

Rafael Otto: [00:06:07] Yeah. Say more about that parent involvement piece because I know that's been an important part of Early Works and an important part of what's happened in the preschool. What has that looked like and how has that evolved?

Brian Berry: [00:06:19] Well, that's an interesting story. It really evolved when.. when I first came into being superintendent four years ago. And like I said, I started in these meetings down at the preschool, these Early Works meetings. And I was really impressed with the parents that were there and the type of communication they were giving and their feedback. And then I noticed that a few of these parents were parents of high school students that I never would have imagined would have come up to the high school and said "Hey, Mr. Barry. Have you ever thought about this, this, this?" They wouldn't do that and then I started to question, "huh? I wonder why they wouldn't do that." Because then it comes back to one of those things where I have to start looking at me, when that's not really comfortable. So that's what I did. I took a look at me and how I was running things and really thought about, wow, what could we do different to make it a little more user-friendly for our parents coming in the door. And that's what we've started to do.

And a few of those parents, once I started listening to them and getting involved with some of the meetings, Aaron Helgerson would take some of these parents up to Portland, to Salem to meet with the governor and it's like, wow! These are really articulate parents that I want around my kids. I want them to be a part of this program and we were having a lot of issues with teachers. Actually it wasn't even teachers, it was just staff retention at the time and getting people to stick around for more than a year.

And it would be a game changer in the community if we could get local people to be part of our little school community or district community and be able to work with our kids and then be able to see them out in the stores and comment on them with that growth mindset going, "Wow! Man, it's great to see you behaving really well in the store," you know, things, just little things like that. And that started to be a real game changer for us. And what we did is we started to look at that and the way we treated especially the Early Works program. The teachers at the Early works program, were we paying them what teachers were getting paid for high school, for middle school or elementary school?

And the answer was we were not. It made no sense to me that they weren't part of our pay scale. We contract with teachers, they are teachers. Same thing with the IAs. Taking a look at our IAs and saying, are they getting paid the same amount that they should be paid, that our other IAs are getting paid?

And what we did is we made sure that we tied all of those people into our regular contracts. So they were getting paid very similar, sometimes even more because, uh, Preschool Promise, there were a few IAs that even got more because of the training they were getting. Then we got into a little different issue with the training because then it was like, "Wow, our preschool is just incredible." It's a model for the state, for a small rural preschool. So how in the world is that happening? Well, we started seeing that, first of all, we have incredible leaders in the preschool but our IAs are actually being trained. So we made it a focus to start training IAs.

And in order to do that, we had to go, you know what? We have to take money and put it aside, just like we do for teachers.” Because we pay the teachers to get trained, for continuing education. And we decided, you know what? We're going to make it a priority in the Yoncalla school district to make sure our IAs have access to training.

So if they feel like they want to further their education or even work towards becoming a teacher down the road. We want to be able to support that. And that's what we have done. And again, it's been a game changer for our district.

Rafael Otto: [00:10:17] Just to clarify IAs, meaning, your instructional assistants?

Brian Berry: [00:10:21] Yes. I'm sorry.

Rafael Otto: [00:10:22] No, that's okay. I just want to make sure our listeners understand that particular term. There's been some really great stories about parents who have been connected to the preschool becoming IAs, becoming instructional assistants, and using some of the district resources, the district has supported them to get additional training, professional development. You're seeing some people move on with the goal of getting their bachelor's degree so that they can continue to teach. Can you share a story or two about that?

Brian Berry: [00:10:52] Sure. I can share one. I'm going to leave her name out though, because a matter of fact, you'll be talking with her, so you'll...she'll probably say the same story. I remember the first time I met her, she came up to the high school - she had a couple of daughters that were enrolled - I remember her coming up to me, I had never met her, she pointed at me and she said, “Well, I'm here just so you know, I'm a mama bear and you're going to be hearing from me a lot.” And I thought, “Wow, that was pretty intimidating.” I just welcomed her to the district and, we laugh about it now, but, I saw her, we had a couple of small, you know, teenage issues with her kids coming in the school that we dealt with.

I think we both came to realize we both wanted the same thing, and that is: we both wanted her daughters to graduate with diplomas and be able to access post-secondary education and just become incredible leaders out in whatever community they decided to be a part of. And so to see her, because I went down to an Early Works meeting then, and there she was at the table, talking and just being really outgoing and really forward-thinking also. I was really impressed with her, thinking, “Wow, that is the type of person, if we could corral some of her energy, that would be the type of person I would love to be around our kids and to really nurture that.” And that's what's happened with her. She actually is right now, has gone back to school with the goal of becoming an elementary teacher. Right now she's an Instructional Assistant and we've got her paired with another just incredible teacher at the elementary, so she's learning firsthand. She was part of the preschool program. So she was aware of our district approach and our systems approach and what we're trying to achieve.

So she's been all in on that. She'd been part of our growth mindset groups, parent trainings, you name it. She was just taking the bull by the horns and gone forward. And again, the thing I'm excited about is, not only she's making a difference in all of the children in our elementary school and our preschool, but her kids have totally changed. They're all of a

sudden seeing their mom with that growth mindset and catching them, you know, words mean a lot. And she has changed just the outlook of those kids' lives and the lives they're going to have going forward. It's an incredible thing to see.

And then we've got another preschool IA that right now is one of our teachers. This is her first year. She's currently getting the rest of her formal education, so she can be officially part of that team. But, she's a first-year teacher; we put her on the pay scale. We've made sure that we've equipped her room with all the latest technology that she needs for kids. We also have her paired with our other preschool leader and instructor. Megan is just the best preschool teacher in the state of Oregon, without a doubt.

And I know I probably just offended a bunch of people. So, uh, so I'm really sorry about that, but if you want to see the best preschool teacher in the state of Oregon, Come down to Yoncalla and take a look.

Rafael Otto: [00:14:17] Go to Yoncalla, Go to Yoncalla...

Brian Berry: [00:14:18] There you go. And then we've got another one, who's our librarian. She's decided that she wants to go back and get her teaching degree.

So she's right now going through classes and that's so fun to see her in the halls because she knows I like to see people smiling and saying good morning, but she'll smile and say, good morning and go, "Hey, Brian, I'm taking this class. What do you think?" And it's just like, Aww you're making me happy because those are the people, they're in Yoncalla for the long haul. They're going to stay and we're growing our own, we're not going to have to worry about people staying for a year and then just leaving.

Rafael Otto: [00:14:55] Yeah, talk more about the benefits of working with parents in this way, this grow your own strategy. What are the strengths from your point of view and what kind of message do you feel like that sends to staff, other teachers, and to the community?

Brian Berry: [00:15:10] Well, I think the benefits are just, first of all, getting to know your community. Getting them to understand that you may not agree with everything I do, which no one's going to. However, there's a rhyme or reason for what we do. Like I've told people at the meetings when I took over, we're going to talk about where... we're going to get you involved.

I'm all about collaboration and we're going to talk about collaboration. I'm going to listen to what you're saying, but ultimately, there's one person that has to make the decision in the district, and for right now that's me. And the board has said, going forward, it's going to be me, too. So, so thank goodness.

Rafael Otto: [00:15:51] The board is behind you.

Brian Berry: [00:15:52] Yes they are. They know that our preschool is driving everything that we're doing k-12. And they're all in, they've been all in from the start. But for the community to be able to understand and to be able to listen and understand that this is the reason we're putting money in this area, which, in this case would be "grow our own" instead of

buying another teacher or half a teacher, whatever we could afford. Because in the long run, what they're going to be able to do for our community is priceless.

Again, those little interactions, being able to see kids out on the playground during the summer, and being able to see their faces light up when they see their teacher... I'll tell you right now - and again, I've been in Yoncalla forever - I can go into any store in Yoncalla and everybody knows me. That's a really gratifying thing. They might not always agree with me, but they know me and they're able to say, "Well, I love the things you guys are doing with the remodel. Love the things that you guys are doing with the preschool and where the money is going over here." Because they understand what we're doing, and they also understand the long-term goal that is going with it. For me, that piece is priceless, for the community piece.

And then our staff, we're a family. I mean, people can say whatever they want, but a school district is a family and especially a small rural district. Just like a family there are some people you love to death, and there are some people that they drive you crazy, but we all have the same goal. And as long as we're moving forward and concentrating on that long-term goal, then I am good to go. And when you're "growing your own", guess what? All of those people understand what the long-term goal is. Now, again, they may not agree with how you get there, but they're all in on that long-term goal. And then it's a matter of talking about, okay, now, how are we going to get there with that growth mindset? You know, that piece.

And then looking at the money it saves the district. I mean the investment we make in community members and our staff community going back and getting educated. You know, we're a big conscious discipline school. Conscious discipline is not something that you just teach one time and it just works. It takes years of practice. and getting staff to understand, and the students, and the community to understand... Okay, what does this actually mean? And to be able to move forward with that. If you have to retrain staff each and every year, starting all over, it costs a lot of money in a small rural district. We just can't afford that.

Rafael Otto: [00:18:45] When you're talking about the retention needs of the district, that is a chronic issue in smaller districts in rural communities. The professional development piece is part of that. So, the "grow your own" strategy kind of meets... helps you with those issues as well.

Brian Berry: [00:19:04] Oh, I would totally agree. And I would also say that the "grow your own" strategy works really well for us with equity issues going forward. Because we're a small rural community, so it's difficult for us... we don't have the luxury of picking from a lot of different people. And it's difficult for us to be able to find people that want to come to a small rural community, if they're not from there already. But being able to do that, we're miles and miles ahead of the game.

Rafael Otto: [00:19:35] What do you feel like higher education institutions would need to know about supporting a district like Yoncalla who is using this kind of "build your own/grow your own" strategy?

Brian Berry: [00:19:48] Yeah. I think mostly from a higher education standpoint is that our parents and our staff really need more online opportunities. They really do. It's difficult for them... These are people for the most part, again, making minimum wage. They can't afford to drive from Yoncalla to Eugene every day to take a class.

That's just not going to work. And the truth of the matter is, we can only support so much as a district goes. I would love to be able to pay mileage and get them up there and you know, more, more institutions are doing, especially with COVID, more online types of classes, more making sure that classes are convenient for working parents. These are parents that work during the day and then come home and get to work. So it's like, okay, where do you find time to get a class in there? And just being able to understand that, oh, communities like Yoncalla... maybe working with small communities and collaborating with small communities and getting to know what our needs really are, because there's a lot of difference between the needs in a small community and a big community. We just have different needs. And again, our parents are used to collaborating and they're used to talking about what we can do to help them.

And they're also used to, when we listen, that we're going to try everything we can to do that, you know? And if it can't be done, I'm going to say, "Okay, just so you know, that we literally cannot do that piece of it for legal standpoint or whatever." It's just a totally different way of looking at education. And I'll tell you right now that the education that our Instructional Assistants are getting... I went through education programs. Being able to get firsthand, quality experience in a program is 75% of the battle. You can learn all you want from a book, and I'm not going to cut that down because that's what we do in the high school, we throw open the book and say, okay here we go, page 52 or whatever. But to be able to see our IAs work through behavioral issues and have hands-on knowledge of how to implement a conscious discipline piece with what they're doing, and then to watch them do it and be able to say, "Incredible job, that's exactly what we're talking about." Or be able to hear them catch, you know, at the high school level, be able to hear them catch students say something like, "Oh, I can't do that." And it's like, "No, no, no, no, you can't do that right NOW.. It's, again, that different way of thinking about it.

Our staff is incredible at doing that. Our teaching staff, you would think would be able to do that, but our Instructional Assistants, because they've been trained, they know what's going on and they know that growth mindset piece is a huge, huge deal. Not only in the classroom, but when you go home, when you're talking with your families, when you're, you know; it makes a huge difference in the community.

Rafael Otto: [00:23:07] Do you see opportunities to build this model out, strengthen it maybe in Yoncalla, but to have something like this be more common in smaller school districts in the state?

Brian Berry: [00:23:21] So I would say, strengthen it maybe in Yoncalla. Let's say strengthen it, *yes, sir!* in Yoncalla.

Rafael Otto: [00:23:28] well, I mean, it feels like a strong model as it is so.

Brian Berry: [00:23:32] It's strong but it has to get better. And I do see ways of pushing it out. But again, for me, looking at it from the standpoint of a superintendent and the growth I've had to go through. And I've got a long ways to go, because I don't know nearly enough about preschool/early childhood education.

I do know that it's, like I said, it's the bedrock of what we're doing. But being able to open yourself up and say, "Okay, I'm going to be open to collaborating" and listening to not only the staff, but parents and being able to say, "You know what? Everybody's got something to bring to the table..."

To be quite honest, I'm in a lot of superintendent meetings. I see some people that are like that. I don't see a lot of people that are like that. I see a lot of people that like to say, "Well, I know this because of my years of experience and this is the way we're going to do it"

And I just know for Yoncalla, that has not worked. Like I said, I've been there since '96 I believe it is. And as a teacher there, that structure never worked. It never worked. I saw it going through, and I saw some of the things I did as a teacher and then as a principal because things weren't working.

And so I decided, you know what? I'm just going to do my own little thing over at the high school. And you know what? That's not being a team player. It worked really well for the high school, but it didn't help the elementary at all. And then all of a sudden to become a superintendent and to realize, well, I've got a learning curve to go here. People have to be able to open up and realize that the learning piece is not just for some one who doesn't have a piece of paper that says you have a diploma or degree. You need to be learning 24/7 all the time. And that needs to start as a superintendent with your district and your community.

Rafael Otto: [00:25:30] It sounds like what you're saying is to really... To be in that role and to make effective decisions, it's about understanding the whole system and all of the pieces and perspectives that are at play. But it's also about looking at yourself and there's a sense of personal transformation and really thinking about how you want to lead and some different ways to do that.

Brian Berry: [00:25:51] I would totally agree with that. And let me tell you it's been painful. So I will just say that, but it has been totally worth it. And again, I can't wait to see what I'm going to learn next. Because, like I said, I have a long ways to go. There are people around this state that are much smarter than I will ever be. But just to be able to put people in the right position and to see a community member go... "Oh, wow! I think I could really be a teacher" and have their superintendent go, "You know, what? Get rid of the word 'think.' You could be a teacher, here's what you need to do." And then help them through the process, knowing, okay, this person probably has a full-time job, this person probably isn't making a lot or whatever the obstacles are and then go, let's get rid of the obstacles, see how we can do that and then let's move forward and see what we can do post-secondary wise, to get you there wherever you want to be. That's what we do at the high school level.

It's not my job to make sure I tell high school students what to do and what their life should be like. It's my job to give opportunities. And then once they say, "Oh, that interests me,"

then it's like, okay, let's do some research. Let's figure out how we can get you there together and then you're good to go. Then you get to make some decisions if it works for you. And again, on a community level, when you empower community members, you get a community that's growing and that's exactly the way I see Yoncalla, is that it's a small rural community that's been through a lot of challenging times with the timber industry going out of business and lots of tough times. But we're going definitely in the right direction right now.

Rafael Otto: [00:27:42] That's powerful stuff, Brian. Really appreciate you talking with me today. It's great to hear these stories and your perspective on what's happening in Yoncalla.

Brian Berry: [00:27:52] Thank you very much and Go Eagles!

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